

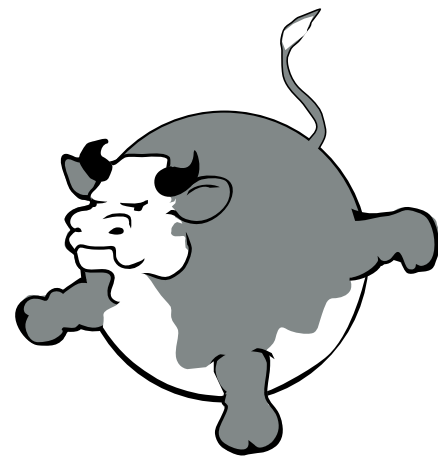
# Beef Talk: Don't buy blowfish; use EPDs

by **KRIS RINGWALL**,  
*Extension beef  
specialist, North  
Dakota State  
University*



Cattle producers do not sit around most winter evenings pondering the activity of blowfish, sometimes called puffer fish. No, this time of year cattle producers find themselves paging through bull sale books and dreaming of the perfect bull.

The evening pictures bring about a certain amount of contentment to finish the day. The perusal of the expected progeny differences (EPDs) rejuvenates some basic math skills, quickly sorting the best to the top. But what about blowfish?



## **Puffed up**

Blowfish have the unique ability to puff themselves up by rapidly swallowing large quantities of water or air; therefore, along with significant spines, they become a rather difficult target for pending predators. As a young child, I had the privilege of having a dried blowfish on my shelf, and I was always amazed just how difficult any contact with a blowfish was.

Blowfish, like many fish, simply spend their time eating and enjoying life, but they are obviously quite prepared for survival. A little natural selection, and there seems to be a real opportunity to simply “look” big and mean and survive. But underneath, there is simply a little fish that stays alive and continues on for another day.

The connecting point for beef producers is that there are blowfish in the beef industry as well. These are bulls that have a knack for looking big and capable as you stroll by their pen at the bull sale, but when you get them home, they are just another bull eating hay.

Looking big and mean may be a good strategy for blowfish, but in the world of commercial beef production, using “blowfish” bulls is not a very wise strategy.

## **Avoiding blowfish**

The best defense for avoiding bulls that are simply blowfish is having a plan and using it. The best plan for any bull-buying strategy is based on the use of EPDs.

Yes, EPDs are the root of any well-developed selection plan within the commercial beef business. Although crossbreeding certainly has the ability to offset problem areas as well, all beef-breeding programs must start with a selection plan to arrange the best genetics (DNA) available in a producer's herd.

So, the basics are simple. Every bull, at least those bulls recorded with a breed association, should have a reasonable list of EPD values. EPD values are the expected progeny differences when two bulls are randomly mated to cows of the same breed.

For example, if Bull A has a weaning weight EPD of 40 pounds (lb.) and Bull B has a weaning weight EPD of 60 lb., then Bull B should, on the average, sire calves that have the genetic potential

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**The trick in a good beef-breeding plan is to stack the bull pen full of great EPDs.**

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to weigh 20 lb. more at weaning. The calculation is 60 lb. (Bull B) minus 40 lb. (Bull A) equals a 20-lb. genetic advantage for Bull B.

This is the same concept for all EPD values. A quick review of the numbers will allow any producer who is looking for a new bull to soon figure out who is the real bull in terms of growth or size versus who is the blowfish and simply puffed full of air and looking good for the day.

The trick in a good beef-breeding plan is to stack the bull pen full of great EPDs. Buying the right bull is an offensive move for survival.

And don't forget, while some bulls are simply blowfish, a few bull producers are, too. Beware, and don't give in to the big, puffed-up bull. Hold your ground, and buy the bull you need based on EPDs.

**Counterpoint**

The initial column above generated many thoughts from readers. And if a thought was generated, that should be considered a success.

In the world of beef production, finding the finite, absolute answer is very difficult. All environments are different, and many times management techniques or protocols must be modified to accommodate local environments. This certainly would be true of genetics, as not all cattle fit all environments. What is interesting is how, as producers, we attempt to develop a plan that we can make fit into our operation.

One truth that is not debatable is that numbers need to be incorporated into the bull-buying thought process to effectively evaluate all options.

My experience is that any time an article is written regarding the use of EPDs, the responses vary widely. However, one common thread does exist: Many producers simply are skeptical of utilizing numbers instead of something they can touch and feel.

The original point was referencing the need to be careful when numbers are not presented, as what one sees

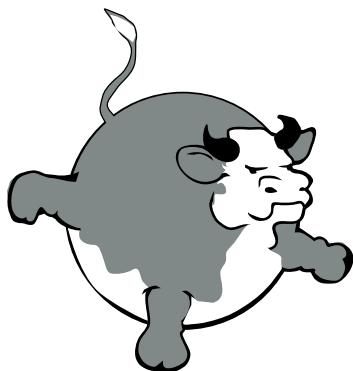
is not always what one gets, particularly when buying bulls. Within the industry, there are blowfish bulls — bulls that look big and pretty, but don't deliver in regard to the calf crop they produce and the producer ultimately sells. The best defense is numbers.

The counterpoint is that, through the years, there have been those producers who have represented bulls with numbers that were not the most accurate. In fact, some bull sellers actually may have misrepresented a particular bull by using invalid numbers. For those who didn't get

what I just said, the point is this: Some people lie.

As a defense, many producers have opted not to utilize nor trust numbers and default back to a visual appraisal, hoping

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what you see is what you get. Articles that promote numbers (in this case EPDs) become suspect.

This creates a serious dilemma.

### Numbers are needed

Numbers are needed and should be utilized to make decisions. When numbers are ignored in the world of genetics and within any managerial process, a producer is no longer utilizing tools that can lead to real change.

The point still remains: The best plan for any bull-buying strategy is one based on the use of EPDs; but, as was pointed out to me very vividly, some of "the biggest blowfish are those who utilize EPDs." This can create a major fundamental issue in the management of beef herds.

Breed associations go to great lengths to assure accurate and true numbers are presented to producers. Breeding companies attempt to include a high percentage of proven bulls within their inventory for producer use. These bulls are tested independently of the wishes of one producer and must stand the test of time for many traits.

While numbers can be misused, I still need to err on the side of trust. I need to seek assurance from astute breed associations to make sure the numbers are true and will work.

In addition, simple selection based on a production trait does not equate to profit. Producers need a plan that may utilize the newer index EPDs or an astute blend of single traits, but remember that selection for any EPD still will not assure that a profit is made.

Yes, the blowfish article was a little on the extreme, but the hope was and still is that those who don't incorporate some level of EPD understanding are missing an opportunity to help their selection process.

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**Editor's Note:** Addressing the past, present and future state of the beef cattle business, "Beef Talk" is a weekly column distributed by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Agricultural Communication office. Ringwall is executive secretary of the NDBCIA, director of the Dickinson Research Extension Center and an NDSU Extension beef specialist. An archive of columns can be found at [www.beefstalk.com](http://www.beefstalk.com), and your comments are always welcome.

